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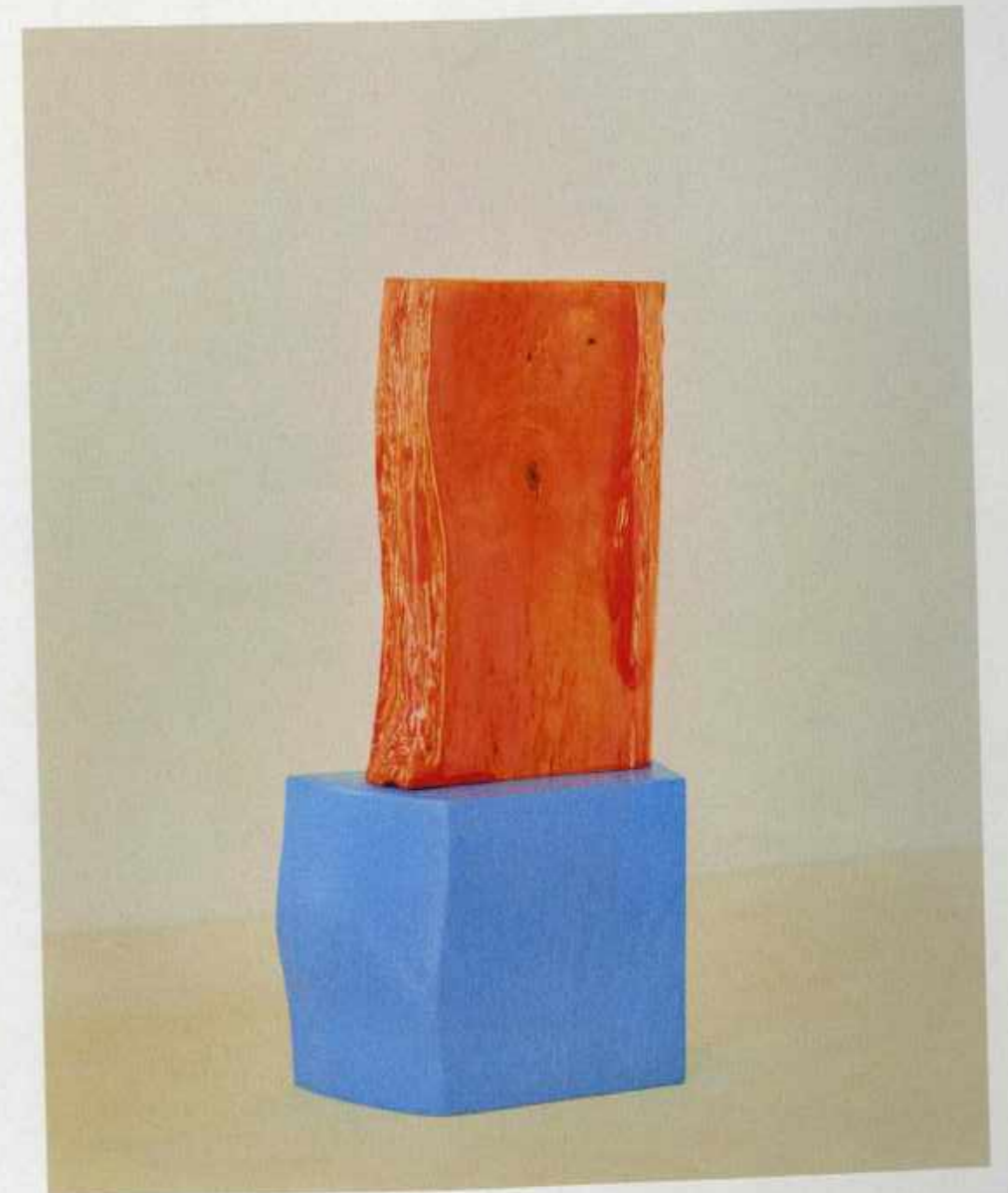
MAGAZINE



Primal forms

Swedish designer and artist Mattias Sellden sees the objects he creates as items of furniture as much as they are works of art, and calls his growing collection his "little wooden friends". He discusses his elemental forms with the American critic and curator Glenn Adamson.

WORDS: Glenn Adamson
PHOTOGRAPHY: Vincent Sjögren





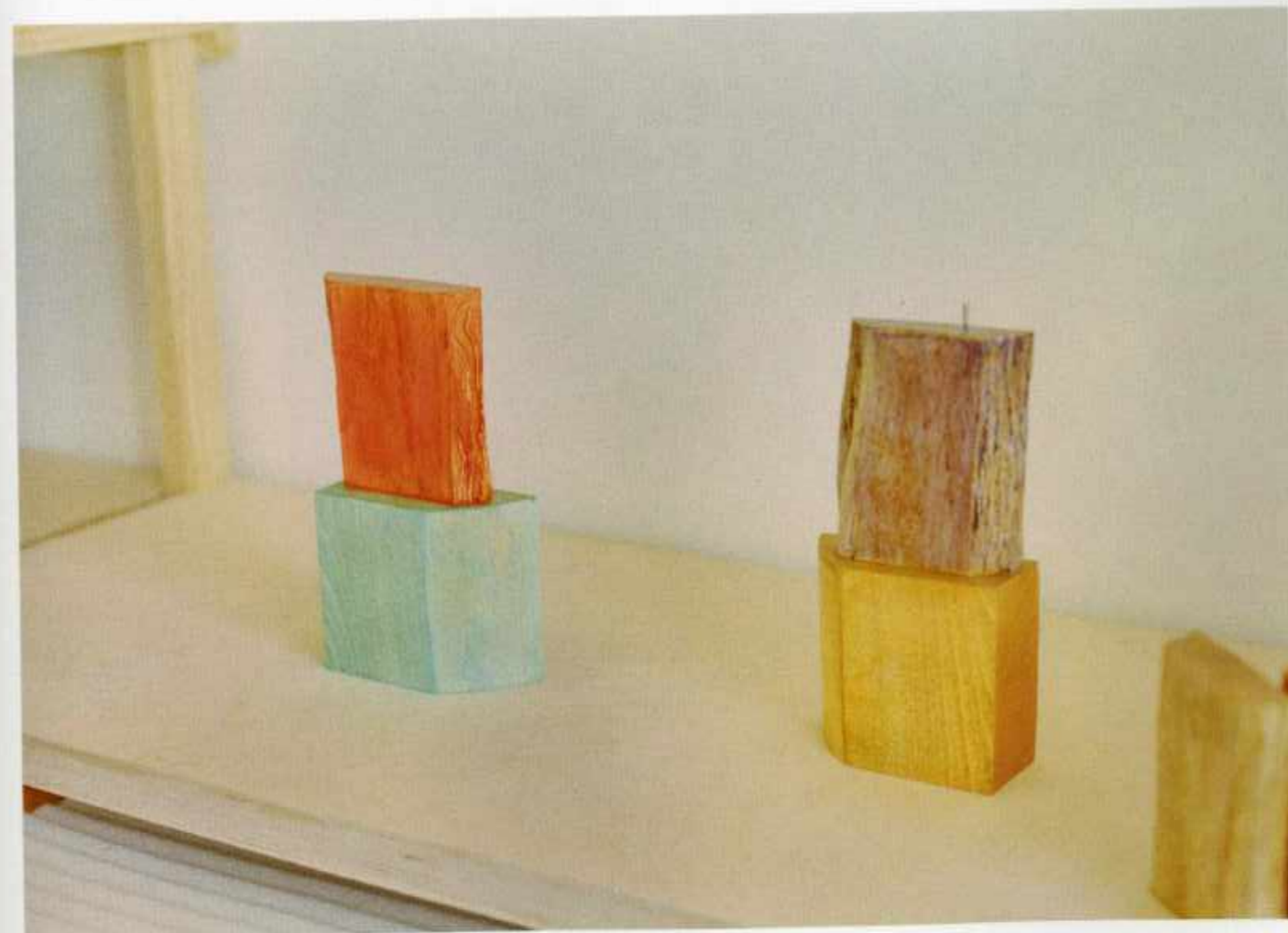
Sellden calls his objects his "little wooden friends", only a little ironically. They recently participated in the group show *A New Realism*, curated by Glenn Adamson at New York gallery Friedman Benda.

At the age of 14, Mattias Sellden nearly failed woodworking at school, but now he is one of Sweden's most exciting furniture designers. What happened in between is an interesting story. In 2010, he arrived at Konstfack, Stockholm's illustrious art school, and pursued an undergraduate degree, returning in 2017 to study for a master's. During this period he also delved into design theory, philosophy, carpentry and architecture. In 2018, he considered dropping out to become a chef. All the while he was searching for answers and motivation. He read widely, but, as he puts it, "to consult Descartes in these matters is not very helpful. Believe me, I've tried".

What saved Sellden was a plank. It was beautiful, at least to him, with a unique, characterful curvature. It sat around in his studio untouched for weeks. Finally he determined to make something with it, but the last thing he wanted to do was cut it apart, plane it and remove its character. Instead he worked with it, taking the contours of the natural timber as a starting point.

Sellden has been following this pathway ever since, in what he describes as a "self-rewarding system". Each object implies the next, opening up new problems and possibilities. He finds it important to have the right amount of raw materials at hand in the studio: too many planks, and they lose their uniqueness, becoming an undifferentiated mass; too few, and they become precious, inhibiting his creativity. He's found 20 to be about right. On occasion, he has found himself looking at one of his designs lying on its side, and that has suggested to him a new direction.

This totally unplanned creative process has gradually led Sellden to a whole family of objects, his "little wooden friends", as he calls them. They do indeed have a quality of animation about them, each one its own stance and personality, which makes them seem like living companions. They range from low stools to monumental bookshelves, with various bench and table forms in between. Yet the forms are not really specified to these purposes – they are just as much art objects as items of furniture.





Over the past year, Sellden has engaged in a "lockdown dialogue" with Friedman Benda, the leading New York design gallery. It began, like so many conversations these days, on Instagram. Soon it unfolded into a more wide-ranging three-way conversation between the artist, gallery principal Marc Benda and the writer Glenn Adamson. "Sellden clearly had a unique perspective and was growing exponentially over a short period of time," says Benda. "We wanted to lend support." After first including his work in a large-scale survey show entitled *What Would Have Been* – which documented the disruptions of 2020 – the gallery invited Sellden to participate in *A New Realism*, curated by Adamson. The exhibition, which opened in June, presents nine makers whose practices are founded in personal pragmatism, as a means to engage our tumultuous present.

Sellden shares his studio, in a large dilapidated building, with a number of creatives working within design, craft and art. The building, in the Stockholm suburb of Bagarmossen, will eventually be torn down.





Sellden's objects differ in scale and implied use, ranging from low stools to monumental bookshelves, with various bench and table forms in between.

"What happens in the computer is always in flux, everything is always in a state of becoming rather than a state of being. And for me, it's only when something is that I can relate to it," says Sellden, discussing the hands-on quality of his objects.



Sellden's designs are often strikingly kinetic, as if they had been frozen mid-stride. The surfaces may be painted, usually when Sellden is using timber with a neutral colour and grain, while in other cases he allows the character of the wood to come through a translucent stain. Recently, he has been using thinly applied oil paints, which in combination with a curled grain produce what he calls a "holographic" effect. With their exposed dovetail joints, the structure of these objects is direct in the extreme. It is almost as if he has reinvented a new design language.

Is it possible to see, in these irregular objects, the outlines of a certain critical position? Their organic quality might speak to some environmentalist agenda, or perhaps simply an antipathy to the dehumanising effects of mass production – a central theme of craft discourse for well over a century now. But while Sellden does admit to a certain antipathy to the over-processing that design so often entails – "why grind wood down to sawdust, glue it back together, use a CNC router? Why not use it as it is?" – his stance is more pragmatic than programmatic. In Sellden's experience, theory tends to be unsatisfying; he resists the idea that his objects should have to "mean" something, as if they were statements or arguments in material form. His intention is both more open-ended and more concrete than that: he wants to give us anchor points into physicality itself.

Needless to say, this is a topical theme, given the increasing dominance of the virtual in contemporary life. The digital environment in which so many of us increasingly spend our days is quite literally inhuman. It lacks materiality, gravity, or any other form of embodiment, and is organised by algorithms so complex that their operations have become inscrutable even to their creators. "What happens in the computer is always in flux, everything is always in a state of becoming rather than a state of being," says Sellden. "And for me, it's only when something is that I can relate to it."

His work may be primal, but Sellden is no anti-intellectual, and certainly no traditionalist. He enacts a particular relationship between people and objects, premised on presentness, in which both are fully activated. This accounts both for the dynamism of his shapes and, more generally, his involvement with furniture as a genre. Unlike most designers, he's not all that interested in seating, tables and shelves. It's more about what such things get up to when they share our space. "As a human, you instinctively relate to furniture," he says. "It's inherent. You get it for free." Sellden may not be reading Descartes these days, but he's arrived at something just as satisfying as the philosopher's "I think, therefore I am". The answer is to act through the object: I thing, therefore I am.

